H. L. Mencken Tells of Dreiser's New Book

FROM the highest swing of Theodore Dreiser to his lowest stoop there is a distance so great that it seems almost fabulous—the distance, to wit, which separates all that is rarest and soundest in our literature from all that is shoddiest and most trivial. Such a book as *Jennie Gerhardt* is so brilliantly vivid, so profoundly moving, so spacious and dignified, that one turns from it with a sort of dismay to such a book as *The Genius*, with its tedious pedantry, its interminable inconsequence, its childish and irritating flatulence. It is as if Joseph Conrad, quitting a *Youth* or a *Heart of Darkness*, should proceed to a sentimental serial for shopgirls and fat women; it is almost as if Brahms should rise up out of hell to write patriotic ballads for vaudeville.

The phenomenon, unluckily, is not unmatched in our beautiful letters. The late Mark Twain, in the intervals of challenging Swift and Rabelais (and, somewhat behind the door, Nietzsche), often leaned down to challenge Artemus Ward, Charles H. Hoyt and M. Quad; it was his own incurable weakness, indeed, and not the mere imbecility of press agents, that bred the astounding doctrine that Irvin Cobb is his heir and assign. The causes of this disconcerting wabbling, though they are instructive, I need not go into here. I have touched upon them elsewhere, and shall expose them in detail in a forthcoming work. More important to the present purpose is one of the effects. It is this: That one approaches a new book by Dreiser as one always approached a new book by Mark, with a certain uncomfortable uncertainty—with one's æsthetic heart in one's mouth. It may be a new *Sister Carrie* or *Jennie Gerhardt* or *Titan* or *Hoosier Holiday*, and so praise God!—but on the other hand, it may be a new *Traveler at Forty* or *Hand of the Potter* or *Genius*, and so a thousand damns!

Well, here is *Twelve Men*, just off the press. To which of these categories does it belong? Let all cognoscenti be of cheer! Not to the second, surely! But to the first? Almost I am tempted to say clearly to the first. The high swing is undoubtedly there, and though there are also occasional dips to much lower levels the general effect is that of Dreiser at his most penetrating and persuasive. In more than one way he has done nothing better since *The Titan*. It shows, with a few unimportant breaks, a deliberate return to his first manner—the manner of pure representation, of searching understanding, of unfailing gusto and contagious wonderment. There is no banal philosophizing. There is no torturing of flabby theory. There is, above all, no burden of ethical purpose, no laboring of a duty to be performed. Instead there are simply a dozen sketches of character—rotund, brilliantly colored, absolutely alive. The thing is done capitally, and, at its top points, superbly.

Most of these dozen men are real—perhaps all. The author's brother Paul—the famous Paul Dresser, author of *On the Banks of the Wabash* and *Just Tell Them That You Saw Me*—appears in his proper person. Others—for example, Muldoon, the trainer; Harris Merton Lyon and Dreiser's father-in-law—are easily recognized. But this actual reality has little if anything to do with the reality they show upon the printed page. That reality is due altogether to the extraordinary skill of the man presenting them. What he produces is not merely an objective likeness; it is a searching and at times almost shameless inner genuineness. He gets into them; he understands and interprets them; he turns them inside out. And always in a way that somehow seems casual—always with a guileless and offhand air. Not once is there any creaking of literary blocks and tackles. Not once is there a formal vivisection. It is ever a picture he presents, not a diagram.

And what a gaudy and diverting picture it often is! Consider, for instance, the chapter devoted to Dresser-Dreiser, the song writing, tear squeezing brother—the Indiana Rouget de Lisle and Francis Scott Key. Intrinsically, he was an intensely interesting man, huge in body and yet ready to weep like a flapper, a fellow of remarkable talents and yet as devoid of elementary taste as a green grocer or a Congressman, a great success and yet a pathetic failure. But even more interesting than the man himself was the world he moved in and the culture he represented—the world and culture of the old Broadway, of vaudeville theatres, of the spangled demi-monde, of facile friendships, maudlin sentiments, gross revels, shady enterprises, stupid and hoggish folk. In such scenes he was a man of mark. He was the peer and intimate of other men of mark. He drank, drabbed and whooped 'er up with the best of them. But all the while he was something far finer than the others—a man of feeling, a dreamer of grotesque dreams, almost a poet. It was the contrast that made him salient and memorable, and it is the deft and poignant evocation of that contrast that makes his brother's portrait of him so brilliant and so excellent.

Muldoon is done almost as well. He remains at the end a sort of mystery, a man essentially inexplicable, but it is a mystery mellowed and humanized—one recognizes him and takes joy in him without precisely understanding him. So, again, with the forlorn, preposterous evangelist of *A Doer of the Word*—an astonishing creature indeed, a Christian actually devoted to the practice of Christianity, but somehow made credible. So, finally, with Lyon, with the queer Admirable Crichton of the sketch called *Peter* and with the venerable White, the author's father-in-law. In each of these men there was something fantastic. Each was a neglected alien in a nation of the undistinguished. It is Dreiser's feat that he has displayed that oddity vividly without the slightest touch of caricature—that he somehow convinces us of their general humanness, and gets into his portrait of each something of the universal human tragedy.

In brief, this is a book of extraordinary qualities—novel in plan, sound in structure, and, barring a few smears of feebleness, highly adroit in execution. As I have said, it goes back to the manner of *Sister Carrie* and *Jennie Gerhardt*—a variety of representation that has room for the profoundest feeling, but is yet rather aloof and unimpassioned. It projects human existence as the greatest of spectacles, thrilling, harrowing, sometimes downright appalling, but never hortatory, never a moral tale. The trouble with Dreiser in, say, *The Genius*, was that this manner had slipped away from him—that moral pressure had forced him, on the defensive, into a posture not unlike that of the pulpit. *The Genius* presented life less as an engrossing and inexplicable spectacle than as a somewhat mawkish document against comstockery and the Methodist revelation of God. To that extent it wabbled and was flabby. To that extent Dreiser made a mess of it.

But in *Twelve Men* he has his old tools in hand and is back at the trade he knows so well. His hacking is still often crude. He has his old weakness for phrases that outrage the sensitive ear like successive fifths. He must wallow, anon, in his banalities. He must give the English language a clout or two over the head. But the work that finally emerges from his inept striving is work that bears every mark of a first rate artist, save only that of style. It is solid and soundly organized. It has a sort of rough grace. It conveys its idea massively and certainly. It is a good job.

One wonders what the campus pump critics will make of it. One wonders still more how long they will cling to the delusion that the way to get rid of an artist beyond their comprehension is to invent the hypothesis that he doesn't exist. The saddest business of our literary artists is to prove, over and over again, that the academic Schlegels and Brandes of the land are idiots. Poe did it. Whitman did it. Mark Twain did it. And now Dreiser is doing it again.

H. L. MENCKEN.

TWELVE MEN. By THEODORE DREISER. Boni & Liveright. $1.50.

The Macmillan Company will establish a juvenile department this spring, possibly the first completely independent department for juveniles in an American publishing house.